

In brief

Surgeons cleared of manslaughter:

Two surgeons on trial for killing a patient, whose only healthy kidney was removed by mistake, were cleared of manslaughter this week. Consultant urologist John Roberts and locum surgical registrar Mahesh Goel were acquitted on the direction of the judge at Cardiff Crown Court. Graham Reeves, 69, died in March 2000 following the operation at Prince Philip Hospital in Llanelli, Wales.

Europe declared polio free: The World Health Organization last week certified its European region as free of poliomyelitis. The region, which has 51 member states and 870 million inhabitants, has been free of indigenous polio for over three years. The last case occurred in eastern Turkey in 1998, when a 2 year old unvaccinated boy was paralysed by the virus.

California prepares for nuclear terror attack: California's state officials have decided to give all residents living within a 10 mile radius of nuclear power plants prophylactic potassium iodide tablets to protect their thyroids in the event of a nuclear terror attack.

State of emergency in San Salvador as dengue disease increases: The World Health Organization has reported an increase in dengue disease in El Salvador. Twelve hundred cases of dengue and 101 cases of dengue haemorrhagic fever have been confirmed. Children between the ages of 5 and 9 years are most affected. The country's president has declared a state of emergency in the departments of San Salvador, Libertad, Santa Ana, and Cabañas.

Flight attendant awarded \$5.5m in passive smoking case:

A Florida jury has awarded \$5.5m (£3.7m; €5.8m) to Lynn French, aged 55, a flight attendant, who does not smoke but who has chronic sinus problems from spending more than 12 years in smoky aeroplane cabins. She is one of 2800 flight attendants with similar cases against the tobacco industry.

US draws up plans for smallpox outbreak after terrorist attack

Fred Charatan *Florida*

A US advisory group has recommended that people likely to be directly involved in handling any outbreak of smallpox after a terrorist attack should be vaccinated as a precautionary measure—although mass vaccination has been deemed unnecessary.

The 14 member advisory committee on immunisation practices at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has voted unanimously against vaccinating all Americans against smallpox. It said, "Under current circumstances, with no confirmed smallpox, and the risk of an attack assessed as low, vaccination of the general popula-

tion is not recommended, as the potential benefits of vaccination do not outweigh the risks of vaccine complications."

The recommendations update those made by the committee in June 2001 and follow the formation of a joint working group with the national vaccine advisory committee, with forums in major cities across the United States (18 May, p 1176).

It recommends pre-release vaccination of selected groups to improve response readiness to smallpox: "Smallpox vaccination is recommended for persons pre-designated by the appropriate bioterrorism and public health

authorities to conduct investigation and follow-up of initial smallpox cases that would necessitate direct patient contact."

It advised the establishment of smallpox response teams in each state and territory, which might include a designated medical team leader, public health adviser, medical epidemiologists, disease investigators, diagnostic laboratory scientist, nurse vaccinators, and security and law enforcement staff.

The committee has also recommended smallpox vaccination "for selected personnel in facilities pre-designated to serve as referral centres to provide care for the initial cases of smallpox." These facilities would be pre-designated by the appropriate bioterrorism and public health authorities, and staff in these facilities would be selected by the hospital. □

Give patients a second chance before striking them off, says ombudsman

Alex Vass *BMJ*

Patients should be given the chance to "rectify their behaviour" before being removed from a GP's list, warned the health service ombudsman for England, Michael Buckley (pictured), in his annual report published this week.

Nine complaints over unfair removal of patients were investigated during 2001-2—more than about any other aspect of the general practitioner service, said the report. In eight of the nine cases, the complaints were upheld as "justified complaints about the way GPs approached the problem."

Failure to give patients adequate warning or opportunity to rectify their behaviour featured in all the cases. This, the report added, goes against guidance given by the Royal College of General Practitioners and the BMA.

In one case a patient, Mrs B, was removed from her GP's list after telling a receptionist that she was the rudest person she had ever met. The ombudsman

commended the GP's view that he should support and protect his staff, but found the GP's action "hasty and ill judged."

A total of more than 2500 complaints were received by the health service ombudsman in 2001-2, an increase of 3% on the previous year; 204 of these were accepted for investigation and 73% of grievances were upheld. Of the 225 reports completed during the year, 79% concerned matters of clinical judgment.

Eighty one cases investigated by the ombudsman related to poor handling of complaints, of which all but three were upheld. The present NHS complaints pro-

cedure, currently under review by the government, was criticised in the report as being "unduly complicated and time consuming."

Substandard clinical note keeping and juniors' failure to consult senior colleagues also arose in the investigations. Sir Michael, who is leaving his post this year, said that adequate note keeping was an "absolutely crucial part of professionalism." He estimated that close to half of cases contained evidence of substandard note keeping. □

Health Service Ombudsman for England: Annual Report 2001-02 is available at www.ombudsman.org.uk

